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**Seeking Identity under God:**

**A Religious Study of *Go Tell It on the Mountain***

宗教世界里的身份诉求:《向苍天呼吁》的宗教解读

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## Synopsis

Religion is a significant element in African-American culture. Literature involving religion fascinates African-American writers and the relative topic constitutes one of their thematic traditions. Critics Richard K. Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon point out that “the appeal of Christianity has been one of the primary preoccupations of black American” (2). The early African-American writer Phillis Wheatley once wrote poems in the 1760s and thanked the fate that had delivered her from a heathen Africa to Christian America (even though slaveholding). Frederick Douglass also recognized the appeal of Christianity in his 1845 narrative. Black spirituals are omnipresent that shout out their happiness and convey their frustrations to God. Into this religious-laden soil was born James Baldwin, one of the most important African-American writers after Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

James Baldwin was born into a Christian family in 1924 and had served as priest in the local church for three years. These experiences have left significant impact on Baldwin’s aesthetic concept and composition theme. Like other writers of minority ethnic group, Baldwin appeals to identity topic, too. He has once claimed that he is an artist and also a Negro, and he has to deal with both. His role is to “make you realize ... who you are and what you are” (qtd. in Ryan 177). By that claim, Baldwin indicates his duty as a black artist in constructing the individual and collective identity of his people.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* is James Baldwin’s first and also his autobiographical fiction. The story focuses on the painful experience of the protagonist, John Grimes, in his converting to Christianity. On the threshing floor in the church, multiple voices echo in John Grimes’ mind that respectively represent: stepfather’s oppression, blood father’s love, mother’s edification, worldly pleasure attractiveness, religious wonder and his instinct of being spiritual-lifted. These

voices are fighting each other and make little Johnny's conversion to Christianity rather hard. Knelt down before God is not only John, but also those adults. Their submission to God does not completely come from their religious faith but to seek a gimmick in abating their spiritual burdens. Baldwin uses his familiar biblical injunctions and epigraphs to make his narrative rather appealing and particular.

By presenting a kaleidoscope of black characters that have undergone different growing experiences and finally knelt down before God, Baldwin conveys us a message that how black people are seeking their individual identities in the framework of religion. To make it further, we will get a glimpse of how African-Americans' collective identity seeking is religiously marked.

The thesis attempts to demonstrate how the characters seek their respective identity and focuses on how religion works in their road of identity seeking. The concept of identity may have many different interpretations. George Kent defines it as "a functional being" (17). To seek identity is to settle down the feelings of "dislocations and disintegrations" (Kent 17), coming to a complete and peaceful self. This thesis sings the similar tune.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One introduces African-American religion background and its religious thematic tradition in literature. Baldwin's religious experience and exploration in writing are offered, too. The literary reviews on *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are summarized to pave the road to develop this thesis.

Chapter Two deals with religious allusions and symbolism in the novel in relation to the protagonist John Grimes' winning his spiritual independence and psychological maturity.

Chapter Three presents a group of characters in the novel, an epitome of African-American ethnic group, seeking their identity in the framework of religion.

Chapter Four comes to Baldwin's ambivalent narratives in this fiction. Through his skillful and discordant narratives, Baldwin successfully exhibits a group of

fragmented characters.

By developing this thesis, I wonder how religion impacts on Baldwin's characters' seeking their true, functional and harmonious identity. Based on this, we may come to dig out the hidden reason for their identity crisis and how religion functions in their identity seeking.

**Key Words:** *Go Tell It on the Mountain*; James Baldwin; Identity Seeking; Religion; Ambivalent Narrative

## 摘要

美国非裔文化构建中宗教成分是不容忽视的。宗教元素渗入到美国非裔文化的各个方面，也是黑人文学的一个传统主题。评论家理查德 K.巴克斯大勒（Richard K. Barksdale）和柯尼斯·柯纳门（Keneth Kinnamon）在他们编撰的《美国黑人作家》（*Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology*）就曾经指出，基督教十分受美国非裔作家的青睐，在他们的作品中，宗教成分屡见不鲜。早期的黑人作家菲力斯·惠特利（Phillis Wheatley）在十八世纪六十年代就曾经在她的诗歌中谈到虽然她是以奴隶身份来到美国，但还是十分感谢命运将她从异教的非洲带到信仰基督教的美洲。佛兰德里克·道格拉斯（Frederick Douglass）在 1845 年的个人记述中也十分认可基督教的魅力。在黑人当中十分盛行的黑人圣歌是美国非裔表达欢乐和诉说困惑的主要方式。詹姆斯·鲍德温就是在这样的宗教土壤里诞生的，他是继理查德·赖特（Richard Wright）和拉尔夫·艾利森（Ralph Ellison）之后又一重要美国非裔作家。

詹姆斯·鲍德温于 1924 年出生在一个基督教家庭，曾经在当地的洗礼教会任职三年。这些经历为他日后的文学创作和艺术价值观留下了深刻的印记。鲍德温象其他少数族裔作家一样，十分重视身份诉求的主题。他曾经声明自己既是一个艺术家同时也是一个黑人，必须同时面对这两个问题。他在接受《生活》杂志采访时曾经说过，艺术家就是一个情感或者精神的史学家，他的任务就是让人们认识到“你是谁，你是什么”。这个阐释从一个侧面说明了他作为一名非裔作家在非裔集体身份构建方面所应承担的责任。宗教对黑人生活的影响一直是鲍德温关注的问题。

《向苍天呼吁》是詹姆斯·鲍德温的第一部作品，也是他的自传小说。故事集中在约翰·格莱姆思（John Grimes）皈依基督教的痛苦体验上。约翰跪倒在教堂地板上，在幻境中听到各种各样的声音：继父的诅咒、生父的呼叫、母亲的教诲、小牧师的鼓励。各种声音交织在一起，相互斗争，揪扯着小约翰的灵魂。对上帝神圣的向往及敬畏和世俗快乐的吸引形成的对立更是加重了约翰的困惑。当然，跪倒在上帝面前的不仅仅是小约翰，还有那些成年人。他们过去的故事虽然不为小约翰所知，但是通过他们各自的追忆，一个个碎裂的人物

形象展现在读者面前。他们希望自己的困惑在上帝面前获得解答。鲍德温擅长在叙事中加入圣经教义和铭文，从而使他的小说文本中宗教气息十分浓厚，颇具可读性。

鲍德温通过塑造这些黑人人物，主要是向读者传递一个信息，即黑人是如何在宗教世界里诉求自己身份的。进一步说，他展现给读者的不仅是一个黑人个体、而是多姿多彩的黑人在宗教世界里的身份诉求。这给我们提供了一个窗口，使读者从中窥视到美国黑人个体和整个非裔在宗教世界中的信仰困惑以及身份诉求的遭遇。

本文试图说明该小说中的人物在追求和谐自我时的遭遇，强调宗教因素在他们诉求身份中的影响。身份概念十分抽象，解释众多。乔治·肯特（George Kent）在解读鲍德温作品时把身份（identity）定义为“功能存在”（a functional being）。他认为，身份诉求就是克服混乱（dislocations）和碎裂（disintegrations），寻求一个和谐完整的自我。本文作者十分认同并借用这一概念。

本文分为四个章节。第一章介绍宗教在美国非裔文化生活中的重要作用及美国黑人文学中宗教主题的创作传统，詹姆斯·鲍德温的个人经历和在宗教方面的探索以及对《向苍天呼吁》这部作品的有关评论。

第二章就该作品有关的重要宗教隐喻和宗教象征意义进行了分析。通过对黑人圣歌、宗教隐喻和象征意义的分析，论述该小说主人公在成长中的遭遇，强化身份诉求的主题。

第三章在文本分析的基础上，详细地阐释了小说中的重要人物。他们之中无论男女老幼，无论主动或被动，无论出于虔诚或功利，都被框架在宗教的世界里苦苦追索，多角度地展示出黑人在宗教世界里的信仰困惑和身份诉求。

第四章从小说的叙事技巧入手，论述作者是如何运用模糊叙事手法，从而引起认知模糊，达到阐释人物身份碎裂的目的。并且阐明了人们用以寄托精神的教堂神圣形象受到了置疑。

本文在结语部分强调了美国黑人个体和整个黑人族裔在宗教世界里进行身份诉求的共同特点，同时也指出了导致美国黑人身份碎裂的深层原因以及宗教在美国非裔身份塑造中所起的作用。

**关键词：**《向苍天呼吁》 詹姆斯·鲍德温 身份诉求 宗教 模糊叙事



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## Introduction

Religion plays an essentially important role in African-American's cultural construction and constitutes one of the major themes in their literature practice. African-American writers' preference to religion theme is probably because religion is involved deeply in almost every aspect of the blacks' life and reflects their emotional and physical states from a specific perspective. By studying religion's role in African-American literature, we can better understand how religion functions in building African-American identity and constructing its subculture. From another angle to look at it, we may also come to learn how the individual African-Americans are religiously marked in seeking their identities. James Baldwin has been an influential religious style writer and epitomizes African-American thematic tradition of religious literature to some extent. To study James Baldwin and his novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* will provide us a window of how religion works in shaping African-American ethnic identity.

James Baldwin, an African-American writer, for his genius talents and industrious exploring African-American's living conditions and spiritual state, boasts of many titles: novelist, essayist, dramatist, scriptwriter, short story writer and author of children's book.

Raised in a family in which his stepfather David Baldwin was a sternly authoritarian religious fanatic, James Baldwin was greatly impacted by black religion culture. David failed to offer fatherly love to his stepson but despised him for his illegitimacy, his physical weakness and ugliness, and, later, his independence of spirit. Little Johnny had always been cut off the worldly pleasure under the strict family education, as reflected in the very first line of his semiautobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: "Everyone had always said that John would be a

preacher when he grew up ...” (Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* 11).<sup>1</sup> In such a family situation it is little wonder that the future author's development is ambiguous or that his major literary themes are to be the search for love and identity.

Baldwin's influence and popularity reached their peak during the 1960s, when he was regarded by many as the leading literary spokesperson of the civil rights movement. His novels, essays, and other writings attest to his premise that the black American, as an object of suffering and abuse, represents a universal symbol of human conflict. Critics accord Baldwin high praise for both his style and his themes. Baldwin's pet themes are very broad covering from religion in the early to the racial and sexual problems in the later. More often than not, these themes are interwoven together. This complex spider-like web of themes plus his ambivalent narratives often challenges readers as well as himself to confront and resolve these differences. Louis H. Pratt in *James Baldwin* observes, “Baldwin has carved a literary niche through his exploration of the mystery of human being in his art” (qtd. in Ryan 175). His short stories, novels, and plays shed the light of reality upon the darkness of illusions, while the essays bring a boldness, courage, and cool logic to bear the most crucial questions of humanity with which this country has yet to be faced.

Baldwin sees himself as a disturber of the peace -- one who reveals uncomfortable truths to a society mired in complacency. His constant concern is the catastrophic failure of the American Dream and the devastating inability of the American people to deal with that calamity. Pratt finds that Baldwin “engages in perpetual battle to overrule the objections and continues to his probe into the very depths of the past” (qtd. in Ryan 176).

As a productive writer, Baldwin has contributed ten novels, six plays, countless of essays and even some poems. The intense emotional commitment to religion in his early life leaves him an enduring literary legacy of religious subjects and imagery,

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<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, James. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1981. The subsequent quotations from this source will be marked with page number only.

a hortatory style, and high moral seriousness. Three of his books -- *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *The Amen Corner* (1968), and *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) -- deal explicitly with religious experience, and six others -- *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), *No Name in the Street*, *One Day, When I Was Lost* (1972), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) -- derive their titles or epigraphs from spirituals or Scripture. Still other scattered essays that betray Baldwin's ambiguity about his identity and his obsession with religion are involved in similar topics. As he admits in the conversation with Margaret Mead in *A Rap on Race*: "The whole question ... of religion has always really obsessed me" (83).

Baldwin's works always mirror the blacks' aspirations, disappointments, and their coping strategies in a hostile society. Many critics view Baldwin's essays as his most significant contribution to American literature. They serve to illustrate the black man in the twentieth-century America. Highly personal and analytical, the essays probe deeper than the mere provincial problems of white versus black to uncover the essential issues of self determination, identity, and reality. "An artist is a sort of emotional or spiritual historian," Baldwin has once told, "His role is to make you realize the doom and glory of knowing who you are and what you are" (qtd. in Ryan 177).

Fred L. Standley asserts that this quest for personal identity "is indispensable in Baldwin's opinion and the failure to experience such is indicative of a fatal weakness in human life" (qt. in Ryan 177). C.W. E. Bigsby has also claimed:

Baldwin's central theme is the need to accept reality as necessary foundation for individual identity and thus a logical prerequisite for the kind of saving love in which he places his whole faith .... Baldwin sees this simple progression as an urgent formula not only for the redemption of individual men but for the survival of mankind. ... the Negro's much-vaunted search for identity can be seen as part and parcel

of the American's long-standing need for self-definition. (qtd. in Ryan 177)

Baldwin's fictions expand his exploration of the fate of an individual in a society prone to callousness and categorization. His loosely autobiographical works probes the milieus with which he is most familiar -- black evangelical churches, stifling Southern towns, and the Harlem ghetto. Baldwin's feelings about the condition -- altering moods of sadness and bitterness -- are best expressed in the paradoxes confronting the haunted heroes of his novels and stories. Baldwin's fictive artistry not only documents the dilemma of the black man in American society, but also bears witness to the struggle of the artist against the overwhelming forces of oppression. And each character is engaged in the pursuit of artistic fulfillment which, for Baldwin, becomes symbolic of the quest for identity.

Baldwin is hailed by critics as a major novelist and worthy successor to Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright following the publication of his semiautobiographical novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The fiction dramatizes the events leading to the religious confirmation of John Grimes, a sensitive Harlem youth struggling to come to terms with his confusion over his sexuality and his religious upbringing. Central to the novel is his family's legacy of brutality and hate, augmented by the destructive relationship between John and his stepfather, a fundamentalist preacher whose insecurities over his own religious commitment result in his abusive treatment of John and his emotional neglect of his family.

The novel is composed of three parts. The first part, "The Seventh Day" and the third part "The Threshing Floor" are narrated from the perspective of the protagonist John focusing on his "rebirth" by converting to Christianity at a prolonged tarry service. Inserted between them is the second part, "The Prayers of the Saints", narrated respectively from three adult characters: Gabriel, Florence and Elizabeth. By their personal narratives and monologues linked to their individual histories, a group of suffering black characters are bit by bit presented to the readers. Apparently



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